

Battle of Long Island - Conflict:

The Battle of Long Island was fought during the American Revolution.

Battle of Long Island - Date:

American and British troops clashed on August 27-30, 1776.

Armies & Commanders:

Americans

- General George Washington
- approx. 10,000 men

British

- General William Howe
- approx. 20,000 men

Battle of Long Island - Background:

Following his successful capture of Boston in March 1776, General George Washington began shifting his troops south to New York. Correctly believing the city to be the next British target, he set about preparing for its defense. As he lacked naval forces, this task proved difficult as New York's rivers and waters would permit the British to outflank any American positions. Realizing this, Major General Charles Lee lobbied Washington to abandon the city. Though he listened to Lee's arguments, Washington decided to remain at New York as he felt the city possessed significant political importance.

Battle of Long Island - Washington's Plan:

To defend the city, Washington divided his army into five divisions, with three at the south end of Manhattan, one at Fort Washington (northern Manhattan), and one on Long Island. The troops on Long Island were led by Major General Nathanael Greene. A capable commander, Greene was struck

down by with fever in the days before the battle and command devolved to Major General Israel Putnam. In July, the British, led by General William Howe and his brother Vice Admiral Richard Howe, began arriving and made camp on Staten Island.

Battle of Long Island - Howe's Plan:

Leading 32,000 men, Howe prepared his plans for taking New York while his brother's ships secured control of the waterways around the city. On August 22, he moved around 15,000 men across the Narrows and landed them at Gravesend Bay. Moving to block the British advance, Putnam's men deployed onto a ridge known as the Heights of Guan. This ridge was cut by four passes at Gowanus Road, Flatbush Road, Bedford Pass, and Jamaica Pass. Advancing, Howe feinted towards Flatbush and Bedford Pass causing Putnam to reinforce these positions. In scouting the American lines, it was found that Jamaica Pass was undefended.

Battle of Long Island - The British Attack:

Discussing their next step, Major General Henry Clinton suggested moving through Jamaica Pass at night with the goal of surprising and crushing the Americans. To hold the Americans in place while this flank attack was developing, a secondary attack would be launched near Gowanus by Major General James Grant. Approving this plan, Howe set it in motion for the night of August 26/27. Moving through Jamaica pass undetected, Howe's men fell upon Putnam's right wing the following morning. Breaking under British fire, American forces began retreating toward the fortifications on Brooklyn Heights.

On the far left of the American line, Lord Stirling's brigade defended against Grant's frontal assault. Advancing slowly to pin Stirling in place, Grant's troops took heavy fire from the Americans. Still not fully grasping the situation, Putnam ordered Stirling to remain in position despite the approach of Howe's columns. Seeing disaster looming, Washington crossed to Brooklyn with reinforcements and took direct control of the situation. His arrival was too late to save Stirling's brigade. Caught in a vise and fighting desperately

against 10-to-1 odds, Stirling's 1,600 men were ultimately forced to surrender.

Their sacrifice allowed the remainder of Putnam's men to escape back to Brooklyn Heights. Within the American position at Brooklyn, Washington possessed around 9,500 men. While he knew that the city could not be held without the heights, he was also aware that Admiral Howe's warships could cut his lines of retreat to Manhattan. Approaching the American position, Major General Howe elected to begin building siege lines rather than directly assaulting the fortifications. On August 29, Washington realized the true danger of the situation and ordered a withdrawal to Manhattan.

Battle of Long Island - Aftermath:

The defeat at Long Island cost Washington 312 killed, 1,407 wounded, and 1,186 captured. Among those captured were Lord Stirling and Brigadier General John Sullivan. British losses were a relatively light 392 killed and wounded. A disaster for American fortunes in New York, the defeat at Long Island was the first in a string of reverses which culminated in the British capture of the city and surrounding area. Badly defeated, Washington was forced retreat across New Jersey that fall, finally escaping into Pennsylvania. American fortunes finally changed for the better that Christmas when Washington won a needed victory at the Battle of Trenton.